

A conversation with Sonja Lyubomirsky, December 15, 2015

Participants

- Sonja Lyubomirsky – Professor, Department of Psychology, University of California, Riverside
- Luke Muehlhauser – Research Analyst, Open Philanthropy Project

Note: These notes were compiled by the Open Philanthropy Project and give an overview of the major points made by Professor Lyubomirsky.

Summary

The Open Philanthropy Project spoke with Professor Sonja Lyubomirsky as part of an investigation into measures of subjective well-being (SWB). Conversation topics included explanatory vs. pragmatic trials (see precis-2.org) of happiness interventions, and the variety of candidate happiness interventions.

Pragmatic trials of happiness interventions

Many of the studies conducted by Professor Lyubomirsky and her colleagues recruit subjects online, for example through Facebook, mTurk, or other websites, as well as using undergraduate participants. Seligman and colleagues' 2005 trial of happiness interventions is another example of a study that recruited online, using a sample of individuals interested in becoming happier. Online recruitment can be relatively pragmatic in this case.

Some studies are done in group populations, such as schools (e.g., Prof. Lyubomirsky is currently doing a gratitude intervention in 4 high schools in California and New York) and workplaces (e.g., Coca-Cola in Madrid and Hitachi in Tokyo), which are relatively pragmatic settings.

Whether subjects are recruited through a lab or online, they often perform the required interventions in their real lives.

Happiness intervention studies rarely follow subjects for longer than a 6-month period, and such studies face significant challenges with regard to subject attrition and adherence.

Terminology of well-being outcomes

Researchers tend to use a variety of different terms to describe the outcomes of well-being interventions. These might include: “psychological morale”, “mental health”, “adjustment”, “optimism”, or “self-esteem”. Outcomes might also be presented in terms of one’s sense of success and satisfaction in different life domains (e.g. relationships, career, etc.). These terminological differences can make it difficult to locate candidate happiness interventions. However, the majority of well-being intervention researchers measure the two agreed-upon components of well-being: (1) the frequency of positive emotions (or positive affect) and self-reported life satisfaction.

Additional examples of happiness interventions

Happiness interventions that might benefit the general public include activities such as sleep (including napping), physical exercise, healthy eating, mindfulness, meditation, yoga, positive reminiscence, and spiritual activities. Cosmetic surgery has also been shown to increase happiness. Professor Lyubomirsky discusses twelve categories of happiness-increasing activities in her book, *The How of Happiness*. Her own lab has conducted randomized-controlled experiments testing the impact of expressing gratitude (both via writing gratitude letters and “counting blessings”), doing weekly acts of kindness (e.g., help 3 people today or make someone else happier this week), visualizing one’s best possible selves (i.e., practicing optimistic thinking), savoring (e.g., living one’s life like it’s one’s last month here), and affirming one’s most significant values.

Other people to talk to

- Barbara Fredrickson, Kenan Distinguished Professor of Psychology, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
- Edward Diener, Alumni Distinguished Professor of Psychology (Emeritus), University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
- Acacia Parks, Associate Professor of Psychology, Hiram College
- Martin Seligman, Zellerbach Family Professor of Psychology, University of Pennsylvania

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